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AUTHOR Squire, Frances A.; Barkins, Lori

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the value of action research in professional learning, presenting political and practical questions from the work of a primary school teacher who conducted action research on literacy with at-risk students and an intermediate school teacher, now a program officer at the Ontario College of Teachers who is helping create standards of practice and a professional learning framework for teaching in Ontario. The paper describes the development of the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession by the College. It highlights the fifth standard, ongoing professional learning, to illustrate the descriptive quality of the standards. It discusses the importance of using action research and describes the methodology for standards/action research, noting findings from focus groups and writing teams that examined action research. Respondents considered action research a powerful tool for addressing specific themes in their practice and for personalizing standards of practice for the profession. The paper examines the development of the professional learning framework based on the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession, and it discusses learning priorities and challenges for today's teachers. It describes the recognition of action research as professional learning and the establishment of criteria for action research in accreditation. (Contains 12 references.) (SM)

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Ontario College of Teachers
Ordre des enseignantes et des enseignants de l'Ontario

Ontario College of Teachers: Action Research: Establishing Recognition as Professional Learning

Frances A. Squire (Ontario College of Teachers)
Lori Barkins (Grand Erie District School Board

Paper presented at the
Canadian Society for Studies in Education
Sherbrooke, Quebec, Canada
June 9, 1999

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Introduction

This interactive session invites participants to engage in a conversation about action research and its value as professional learning. The political and practical questions posed are complex and emerge from our work in classrooms and at the Ontario College of Teachers. Lori is a primary teacher who was involved for three years in an action research project investigating literacy with at risk students. Fran, an intermediate teacher, is now a program officer at the Ontario College of Teachers involved in creating standards of practice and a professional learning framework for the teaching profession in Ontario. Our interest in action research brought us together last year when Lori was named as a resource teacher on the Ongoing Professional Learning Subcommittee. This subcommittee is looking at "learning in practice" and the ways to acknowledge this important teacher directed professional development.

We recognized that we shared the belief that action research could be a significant professional learning opportunity. Lori's understanding was gained through seeing her team's growth as professionals as they engaged in action research. Fran's knowledge resulted from her field based research work with action researchers across Ontario. We discovered some salient questions accompanying the positive stories of teachers, principals, and other educators. What implications arise when institutional frameworks are linked to action research endeavors? How do we keep the spontaneity and individualism inherent in action research as we establish criteria for its recognition in the educational community? The conference presentation will position action research as professional development from two perspectives; Lori's experience in her primary classroom and Fran's experience with groups of teacher researchers across the province.

Developing the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession:

The Ontario College of Teachers was created in 1996 to license, govern and regulate the practice of teaching in Ontario. The 171,000 members of the College include classroom teachers, administrators, superintendents, Ministry of Education and Training staff, Community Colleges, Faculty of Education staff and others who hold Ontario teaching qualifications. An important part of the College's mandate is to provide leadership to the profession in developing standards of practice for the profession and a framework for career long professional learning.

It was indeed questions like these about the context of professional learning that prompted me to leave my teaching role in 1997 and join the staff of the Professional Affairs Department at the Ontario College of Teachers. Beginning to work in a unit called Standards of Practice and Education, my first task was to figure out why we were engaged in writing standards. The first reason was to meet the College mandate to establish standards of practice for the profession and provide for the ongoing education of its members. What were standards of practice for the profession? We first explored the concept of a self regulatory organization. A self-regulatory body must be able to articulate what it is that makes that body unique. In our case it means answering the questions "What makes being a teacher a unique professional experience?" Why can't any other caring adult who has a university degree be designated "a teacher"? Professional self-regulatory bodies most often use the term "standard of practice" to refer to the descriptors which answer these kinds of questions. The standards of practice, developed over the last year with substantial input from educators and the public, are organized within five themes: commitment to students and student learning, professional knowledge, teaching practice, leadership and community, and ongoing professional learning.

The *Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession* were developed using a variety of sources and resources. Existing statements from other educational jurisdictions were reviewed. This review included both national and international examples. Standards of practice statements from other self-regulatory bodies in Ontario were also examined.

Hundreds of members of the College and the public contributed through structured research activities to the development of the standards of practice. The structured research activities included interviews, focus groups, and written responses to questions posed on the College web site and in College publications. In addition, many participants offered feedback through e-mail, discussion groups, writing teams and written correspondence. Based on our research *The Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession* reflect the thinking and indeed the words of many educators across Ontario. I include here an example of the fifth standard, Ongoing Professional Learning, which will illustrate the descriptive quality of the standards. The standards are organized as five standard statements with key elements elaborating on the initial themes.

Ongoing Professional Learning

Teachers are learners who acknowledge the interdependence of teacher learning and student learning. Teachers engage in a continuum of professional growth to improve their practice.

1. **Teacher learning and student learning**

   Teachers:

   (a) understand that teacher learning is directly related to student learning;

   (b) act as role models who demonstrate lifelong learning; and

   (c) engage in a variety of learning opportunities both individual and collaborative that are integrated into practice for the benefit of student learning.

2. **Professional growth**

   Teachers:

   (a) recognize that continuous professional growth is an integral part of teaching;

   (b) recognize that teaching and professional growth are influenced by personal, social and educational contexts;

   (c) understand that teaching practice is enhanced by many forms of knowledge, ways of knowing and ways to access that knowledge; and

   (d) anticipate and plan the kinds of learning they will need to respond to a variety of educational contexts.

3. **Improving practice**

Teachers:

(a) demonstrate a commitment to continued professional growth;

(b) know that professional learning is most effective when it is job-embedded, relevant and supported by others within the educational community;

(c) reflect on their practice and learn from experience;

(d) draw on and contribute, where appropriate, to various forms of educational research to improve their practice; and

(e) collaborate with colleagues to enhance student learning

Why Action Research?

The Ongoing Professional Learning subcommittee for which Lori was an external resource was asked to focus its part of the inquiry on a sample of teacher researchers. We were to explore how action research related to the themes emerging from our review of standards documents. By doing so we also hoped to find out more about standards as they applied to action research. My particular task was to first investigate what was happening in action research in Ontario and then work with selected groups to collect data for writing the standards. Action research was chosen as a significant example of a teacher-directed, school-based, professional learning that focuses on and validates everyday practice. Lori Barkans and Michael Prendergast, elementary teacher/researchers, were named as resource personnel on the subcommittee responsible for this inquiry.

Lori's Account

My experience in action research began four years ago as part of an initiative by the former Ontario Public School Teachers Federation. The project was still in progress when I was invited to become a resource teacher for the Ongoing Professional Learning Subcommittee at the Ontario College of Teachers. Like many teachers I was unsure of the role of the new College and I was keenly aware of teachers concerns about

maintaining control over their learning endeavours. Our research project had been such a positive experience that I embraced this opportunity to share my enthusiasm, albeit with some misgivings. Fran was the program officer for the subcommittee of which I am now a part.

At Branlyn Community School our 'Action Research Team' set out to find ways to assist our students who were considered 'at risk' in developing reading skills. Our goal was to search for ways to ensure that these children would meet the learning outcomes for reading by the end of grade 3. Preliminary research introduced us to Marie Clay's "Reading Recovery". We visited other counties in Ontario and observed various literacy programs. 'All Star Reading' involved a 'team' approach which included community volunteers. Implementation of this program and documentation of its impact became the focus of our work for the next 3 years. Change was documented through careful records and assessments kept by parents, children and teachers.

Our project emerged from an issue of personal interest. The steps taken were entirely ours. We always felt we were in control. This sense of ownership fostered a growing sense of empowerment The research was meaningful to us and meaningful to our kids . Our data also held personal meaning and relevance to us .The impact of our initiatives made all our efforts worthwhile. Together we had, as Jean McNiff writes, "intervened in our own practice to nurture the process of learning" for our children.

Fran's Account

When I began the task of investigating action research I knew little about it in a formal sense but as I learned more I realized, like many colleagues, that I had indeed been involved informally in action research for many years. I just hadn't called it that. As I explored the literature on action research and connected with educators engaged in action research across the province, I found a variety of approaches and definitions. (McNiff, 1988, 1998; Sagor, 1992; Whitehead, 1993; Calhoun, 1994; Russell, 1995; Delong, 1995, 1998; Hannay,1998). Often linked with reflective practice, teacher research or school-based collaborative research, action research is conducted by practitioners who want to do something to improve their own practice. I learned that action research is a process of inquiry rather than a program and its principles can be applied anywhere within the

educational community. I was introduced to action research being implemented by individuals and groups of educators at the pre-service and in-service levels, within graduate school programs and within collaborative school-based initiatives at both the elementary and secondary panels. Positioned within the broader field of teacher development research, I began to understand action research as a viable way for teachers to research and explore their own work instead of looking to "outside experts" for theoretical answers. I watched and learned and began to absorb the passion and enthusiasm these educators were feeling about their work in schools. I saw that the teacher researcher movement based on teaching as a form of inquiry was challenging the traditional ideas of teacher development as fixing up "deficit teachers". Respecting the professionalism of teachers by validating their experience and practical knowledge, action research also allows teachers to model the kinds of learning experiences they encourage for students. Action research offers teachers and teacher educators an opportunity for individual professional growth through ongoing dialogues with people and texts and an equally important opportunity to create a learning community within a school. After several months of reading the literature, visiting action research sites and meeting with action researchers, I was ready to begin my task.

Methodology For Standards/Action Research

Although there has been considerable attention in current educational literature to issues of theory and practice in action research, (Hollingsworth & Sockett, 1994; Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Burnaford, Fischer & Hobson, 1996 Delong & Wideman, 1998) little has been written on the relationship of action research to the standards of practice for the profession. (The current work of Delong &Whitehead, 1999 and Delong & Black, 1999, has since added to our knowledge in this area) I wanted to see if action research could assist educators in planning their professional learning based on the standards of practice. We also wanted to draw on the expertise of action researchers to help frame the *Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession*. I

knew that I could draw upon the many contacts with action researchers throughout Ontario that I had established during the first months of my job. It was in this capacity that I began to work with Lori's district board in 1998. My network consisted of pre-service teacher candidates, teachers, faculty, superintendents, principals, ministry representatives and program co-ordinators. Some action researchers were beginning the process, others were third year veterans of this form of ongoing learning. Some had voluntarily chosen action research to pursue questions of classroom practice; others were introduced to action research as a required component of another program. Five groups were selected to accommodate a range of experience, diversity of role and demographics. The two beginning researcher groups were facilitated in a taped, informal discussion group format; the more experienced group contributed in a formal focus group methodology; while two heterogeneous groups participated in a writing team strategy.

I felt it would be useful to get at the connection between action research and the standards of practice in several ways. In one instance focus group methodology was chosen because, as Morgan & Krueger (1998) suggest, "Focus groups are fundamentally a way of listening to people and learning from them" (p. 9). I asked purposeful questions to gain insights into the participant's beliefs and attitudes about ongoing learning and standards of practice. The focus group in Waterloo responded to prepared questions like: How does action research support the idea of commitment to student learning? How can action research play a role in building a capacity for leadership? The discussion groups in North Bay and Clinton dealt with questions and issues emerging from the group; however in concluding the sessions I asked specific questions about how their action research supported the themes. The writing teams in Brantford and Kingston were directed to select a theme and explore how action research connected with the standards of practice by composing a standards statement, describing a rationale, creating a narrative example or exemplar, predicting outcomes and posing a set of questions for further discussion. The findings from the analysis of the taped conversations and work groups confirmed the strong links between action research and standards and provided us with valuable data for the creation of the standards draft document.

Findings from the Writing Teams

For the purposes of this paper we highlight the results of Lori's writing team from Grand Erie. The writing teams at Queen's University and the Grande Erie District School Board were deliberately focused on the connection between standards and action research. The Queen's University group was composed of students in the pre-service program, experienced teachers taking masters level courses, two beginning principals, and representatives from the Francophone community. In this case the Queen's professor, involved in a self-study of his own teaching practice, acted as a catalyst in moving action research forward. The Grande Erie group was an enthusiastic research community as well, acknowledging the leadership of their actively involved superintendent, who was modeling her own action research project for staff. To share the teacher writing emerging from our work groups we present an example of the draft documents created by Lori in collaboration with her superintendent Jackie Delong. They chose to connect action research and the standard statement concerning the growth of a learning community.

Creating a Learning Community

	Action Research creates and supports a collaborative learning community for the purpose of improving student learning. It encourages sharing and dialogue among the members of the learning community. [students, peers, parents]
Rationale	The Action Research process recognizes that everyone has a contribution to make to student learning. By bringing together the knowledge and experience of each member of the community, including students, parents, community members, teachers, support staff and administration, the combined learning is greater than that of the individual. Action Research builds a body of educational knowledge created by practitioners that is essential to the improvement of learning and the growth of the teaching profession.

	Action Research supports school improvement through research based professionalism. Action Research develops a culture of research based learning through action/reflection cycles. The action research question is developed from the concerns of the individual group based on the areas they see as needing improvement. Action Research demands data collection and analysis and ultimately sharing in order to answer the question *How can I (We) improve student learning.*
Example	Our project is now closing in on its third year. We focussed in on the question – *How can we assist at-risk children to meet the learning outcomes in reading by grade 3?* Our research team consisted of 3 primary teachers with the same concern. We conducted research with the support of our Principal and Superintendent. The team researched and selected a reading program called "All Star" which involved a 'team' approach. Volunteer parents were an integral part of the implementation of the strategy, the reflection upon its impact and success, with success defined as children improving their reading. Change was documented through careful records and assessments kept by parents, children and teachers. The initiative has become a part of our regular practice in the primary division

Outcomes	Some of the evidence is the quantitative data collected through pre-test, continuous and post-test. More important, a number of the 'focus' or at-risk children are reading and are able to write and talk about what they've read. The evidence is found in parent and volunteer comments, in classroom teacher reflective journals and observations, and in children's self-evaluation. Our means of sharing our learning include published accounts: *Act, Reflect Revise, Revitalize*, 1996 and *Action Research: School Improvement through Research Based Professionalism*, 1998; newspaper interviews, workshops, video and teleconference. We believe that we've contributed to the body of the educational knowledge of the professional educator. We feel we've grown as professionals, better able to meet the needs of our community and improve the learning of our children. We've firmly established a reflective method of evaluating our teaching practices and implementing change. We're able to offer support to others interested in pursuing change in this manner and improving the learning of our children. We continue to grow and learn along with our children. As a learning community we were able to affect profound change which as individuals we would not have accomplished. We grew in confidence —professionals, volunteers and children —as we all realised we had the skills and knowledge to improve student learning. The experience was enlightening —a realisation of potential.

As we prepared the current paper Lori reflected on her involvement in action research and the standards project.

> *An integral part of Action Research is reflection. As I consider the written reflections well after completing this project, a number of issues stand out. Action Research*

presented a meaningful challenge to us. It empowered us to pursue changes that we felt would make a difference to our students and ourselves. It established for us, a reflective method of evaluating our teaching practices. Most importantly, action research allowed us to be in control of the changes to our programs.

For each member of our team, having critical (supportive) partners made the difference in continuing and feeling successful. We worked as a group of three teachers, with enthusiastic support of our principal and superintendent. Our project was a part of an initiative launched by Dr. Linda Grant formerly with the Ontario Public School Teacher's Federation. Her support along with opportunities to dialogue with various experts in Action Research, proved inspirational.

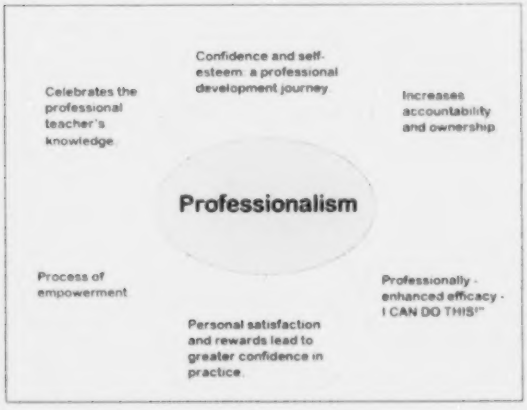
As a learning community we were able to affect profound change which enhanced student learning. Because of this we could also see ourselves as collaborative action researchers within the standards of practice. We could envision using the standards of practice to help us plan our professional growth through action research.

The Benefits of Action Research

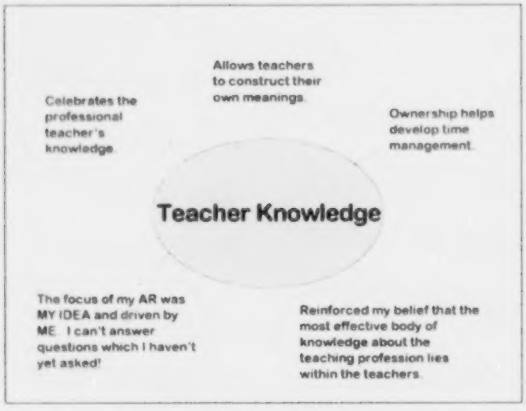
From reflections like Lori's, we have come to understand how action research is, for many teachers, a powerful strategy in this process of "seeing themselves" in the *Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession*. In addition to the data collected for the writing of the standards we obtained important findings about action research in practice. When the research participants reflected on the benefits of action research, they highlighted the positive sense of control over their own learning, set within educational contexts all too often negative. The following themes emerged from their comments about perceived benefits.

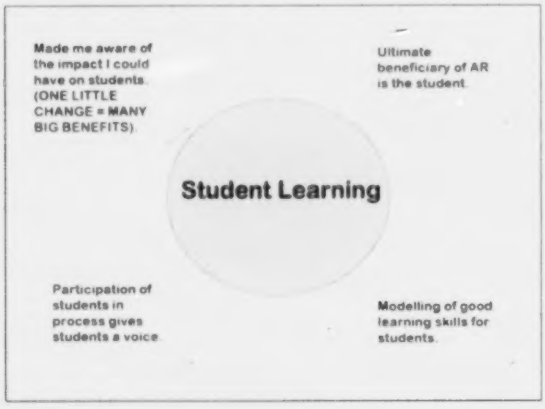
- *an increased sense of professionalism*
- *teacher generated knowledge*
- *reflective practice*
- *collaboration with colleagues*
- *the connection to student learning*
- *knowledge of research skills and*
- *managing the change process,*

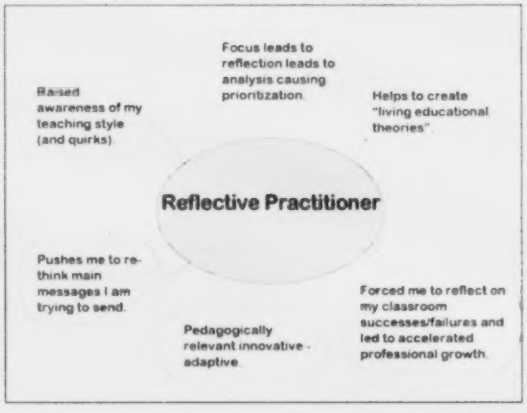
(The following graphics, representing the themes visually, were part of the presentation at the 1998 Act, Reflect, Revise Conference)

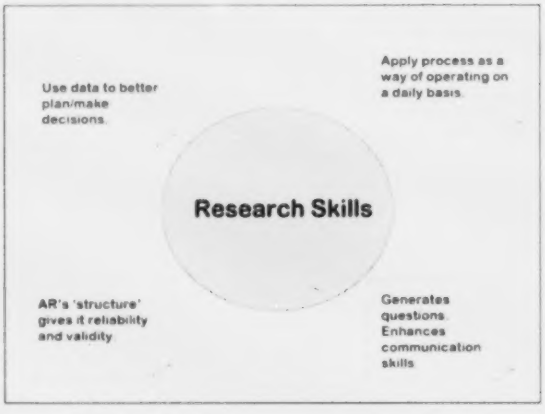

Confidence and self-esteem: a professional development journey
Celebrates the professional teacher's knowledge.
Increases accountability and ownership
Professionalism
Process of empowerment
Professionally - enhanced efficacy - I CAN DO THIS!"
Personal satisfaction and rewards lead to greater confidence in practice.

Allows me to validate the personal and professional experiences of others in a meaningful way.
Working with colleagues around a common concern. Creates a community of learners.
Egalitarian rather than hierarchical
Collaboration
Part of a team. Growth through professional interaction
Opened dialogue with other teachers for comparison and critique. (Something good to talk about).
VALUING VOICE OF TEACHERS.


Allows teachers to construct their own meanings.
Celebrates the professional teacher's knowledge.
Ownership helps develop time management.
Teacher Knowledge
The focus of my AR was MY IDEA and driven by ME. I can't answer questions which I haven't yet asked!
Reinforced my belief that the most effective body of knowledge about the teaching profession lies within the teachers.


Made me aware of the impact I could have on students. (ONE LITTLE CHANGE = MANY BIG BENEFITS).
Ultimate beneficiary of AR is the student.
Student Learning
Participation of students in process gives students a voice.
Modelling of good learning skills for students.


Focus leads to reflection leads to analysis causing prioritization.
Raised awareness of my teaching style (and quirks).
Helps to create "living educational theories"
Reflective Practitioner
Pushes me to re-think main messages I am trying to send.
Forced me to reflect on my classroom successes/failures and led to accelerated professional growth.
Pedagogically relevant innovative - adaptive.


Use data to better plan/make decisions.
Apply process as a way of operating on a daily basis.
Research Skills
AR's 'structure' gives it reliability and validity.
Generates questions. Enhances communication skills.

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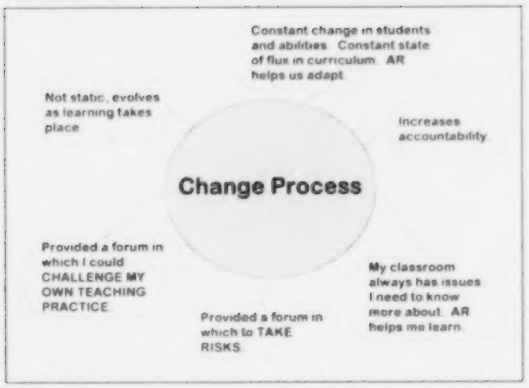
Constant change in students and abilities. Constant state of flux in curriculum. AR helps us adapt.
Not static, evolves as learning takes place.
Increases accountability.
Change Process
Provided a forum in which I could CHALLENGE MY OWN TEACHING PRACTICE.
My classroom always has issues I need to know more about. AR helps me learn.
Provided a forum in which to TAKE RISKS.

The Next Step: The Professional Learning Framework

From this field based research inquiry we confirmed our belief that action research can be a powerful professional growth strategy benefiting student learning and teacher learning. When practitioners reflected on their action research, they highlighted the positive sense of control over their own learning. We wanted to keep that sense of ownership as we began to construct the Professional Learning Framework based on the *Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession*. We knew also that we must start with the professional learning within existing legislation and then move to the more uncharted area of learning in practice. The following background will establish the context for our current work with professional learning.

Background Context

Members of a self-regulatory body acquire the knowledge, skills and values that are part of these standards of practice through ongoing professional learning. The Ontario College of Teachers has a mandate, in legislation, to identify and accredit professional learning programs that support *The Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession*. These programs, when considered together, constitute the core of the professional learning framework.

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The framework begins with the accredited professional learning offered through pre-service teacher education programs in Ontario. Options for ongoing accredited professional learning continue throughout the careers of all members of the College. Both the pre-service teacher education programs and the accredited programs for in-service are made available only through those organizations that have met criteria established by the Ontario College of Teachers.

This means that the Ontario College of Teachers has now assumed, through legislation, the responsibility for the accreditation of pre-service education programs at the faculties of education in Ontario universities. It also means that the College will accredit in-service professional learning. In-service professional learning within the mandate of the College is listed in *Regulation 184/97 Teachers Qualifications*. This Regulation includes programs such as the Additional Qualifications Courses, the Principal's Qualifications Program, and the Supervisory Officer's Qualifications Program. The programs listed in *Regulation 184/97* made under the *Ontario College of Teachers Act, 1996* may now be identified on the Certificate of Qualification issued to members of the College.

Engaging in ongoing professional learning is recognized in the *Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession* as part of "what it means to be a teacher" in Ontario. The Ontario College of Teachers, through the accreditation process for Ontario faculties of education, ensures that pre-service programs are designed to support the standards of practice. Pre-service candidates are required to engage in professional learning defined through the standards of practice.

Members of the College of Teachers will continue to engage in professional learning in order to improve their practice throughout their careers. They do this in a variety of ways. Some teaching assignments require specific academic credits. Some roles, such as the principalship, require certification courses. Movement to a new division may require an Additional Basic Qualifications Course. Placement in a special education assignment will require a course leading to an additional qualification in Special Education. Not all learning however, occurs within Regulation 184/97 courses. Members of the College participate in many other non-accredited professional learning activities offered through their professional organizations,

federations, and subject associations. Members of the College of Teachers also engage in professional learning through their daily practice. Teachers learn everyday in the classroom, school, or whatever environment in which they work. Learning is part of teaching. The College of Teachers may also, in future, develop ways to formally recognize and value these other forms of professional learning. Some of the options for ongoing learning and the section on priorities and choices are outlined in the following excerpt from *Consultation: Professional Learning Framework for the Teaching Profession, April 1999.*

Academic Programs Currently the Certificate of Qualification includes only completed degree programs. **Teachers may choose to:** participate in programs or courses offered through universities, colleges or other institutions or organizations that do not always lead to academic degrees These programs may be prerequisites to enrollment in the certification programs listed in *Regulation 184/97.*	**Research Activities** **Teachers may choose to:** inquire into teaching practice and identify research questions plan and conduct research activities to enhance teaching and learning work collaboratively with others to contribute to the knowledge base of teaching and learning explore ways to access and use educational research
Professional Networks **Teachers may choose to:** partner with business, industry, colleges and universities participate in subject and professional councils join with other teachers or groups to discuss professional issues participate in a local school community committee or school council	**Professional Activities** **Teachers may choose to:** visit other educational settings develop a reading list create curriculum materials and share with other colleagues participate in curriculum writing and/or assessment projects maintain a professional portfolio
Mentoring or Coaching **Teachers may choose to:** serve as an associate teacher mentor a new teacher find a mentor learn with colleagues through observation and feedback, co-operative planning and problem solving	**Professional Contributions** **Teachers may choose to:** participate in, present at, or organize conferences, workshops and institutes contribute to a professional publication

Learning through Practice Teachers may choose to:	Technology and Learning Teachers may choose to:
develop and implement curriculum materials participate in collaborative inquiry conduct action research engage in professional dialogue organize a study group pilot new initiatives	engage in learning using computer, telecommunication, videoconferencing, CD-ROM and videodisc technology join a listserv or research on the Internet
Teachers may also choose to: determine other options for learning beyond these examples.	

Learning Priorities and Choices

The challenge for teachers today is how to maintain, and advance their professional competence in a rapidly changing education environment. Teachers engage in professional learning for a variety of reasons. The range of priorities listed below reflects the complexity of the teaching profession while answering the question, "Why engage in professional learning?"

- Teachers engage in professional learning to meet student needs.
- Teachers beginning their careers at a faculty of education or upgrading their teaching qualifications must undertake learning required by policy or legislation.
- Teachers working in district boards of education, private schools or other employment situations are expected to undertake learning recommended by employers or the Ministry of Education and Training.
- Teachers choose to be involved in professional learning of personal interest to them.
- Teachers collaborate and learn from others in the professional community.
- Teachers recognize that professional learning specific to the use of technology in education is now a reality. Interactive technology, for some teachers, will present new challenges and options for professional learning.
- Teachers may also choose to engage in learning in the broader community.

The professional learning framework recognizes that, in addition to a wide range of priorities for learning, teachers make choices about how and when they engage in professional learning. The framework includes opportunities for both individualized and collaborative learning. It also has sufficient flexibility to accommodate the career and life stages of teachers. Responsible life-long learning is continuous learning that is initiated by teachers, directed by teachers and reviewed on an ongoing basis by teachers.

Just as there are different motivations and priorities for learning so there are different ways of valuing and recognizing that learning. Teachers need to have a say in how this recognition might happen. If the learning is positioned in a formal course structure then the recognition is usually a credit, sometimes involving professional upgrading leading to financial recompense. The situation is not as clearly defined when the professional learning is accomplished through activities such as implementing a new curriculum, professional contributions, mentoring or action research. If we look back at the chart that describes options for learning we understand that there are multiple ways that teachers engage in professional learning. Some of these activities may be considered in future for inclusion in the Regulation 184/97 program structures. Because this regulation is now under review, the time is advantageous for discussion of what "learning in practice" opportunities might be structured for accredited programs. Action research is an example of an ongoing learning opportunity that may be considered for future accreditation. However the issues surrounding this possibility are complex.

Recognizing Action Research: What are the Issues?

Consider action research as an example. From our standards development research and current literature we understand the positive impact of teacher research on classroom practice and student learning. We acknowledge action research as a significant example of learning in practice. We must now come to grips with questions of recognizing, acknowledging and valuing action research as professional learning within an institutional context. And so we are

beginning to think about the next step. How will practitioners be recognized and acknowledged for their work in action research, in mentoring or as associate teachers?

In our field research over the last two years we have asked this question in a variety of research sites, workshop situations and during national and international conference presentations, generating a wide range of response. The following narrative account summarizes the complexity of this issue from the practitioner's perspective and illustrates the continuum of teacher response. I describe a composite focus group in which I ask the question: How would you want to be recognized for your work in action research?

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Twelve people sit around a table with a tape recorder whirring silently in the centre. It's a bitterly cold day with snow waiting in the November air. Despite the tense political climate and work to rule disruptions these teachers, principals and consultants are eager to share their views about action research and their teaching practice. They speak passionately about their experience and the tangible connections to student learning. Then, the question about action research and recognition is asked. A high school principal leans forward and counters,

*"Do you really want to do that? recognize? One thing I like about this action research is the intrinsic part. you are doing it for yourself. You're motivating yourself."**

Another teacher agrees, *"I think recognition might get people doing things just to jump through more hoops."*

The staff development consultant adds *"the reward in itself is the process of going through it."*

On the other side of the table an elementary teacher thumps her hand emphatically as she disagrees. *"Recognition is needed for action research. I spent the same number of hours as I would have for an academic course. Formal accreditation is needed for our work."*

Her colleague agrees *"We want our action research accredited by the College as an important part of our research. in fact we want it retroactive!"*

"How would we do that? Who would decide?" asks a consultant *"I would decide. This is what I can do. This is my job. I'm proud of it but I still can make it better for my students. That's the value of action research."*

Yet another teacher *interjects "But who is to say that my action research project is worth more or less than someone else mentoring a new teacher or conducting an independent reading project? How can we establish an equal playing field?"*

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* in this section the text in *italics* indicates participant responses

This narrative account identifies some of the issues that must be addressed before we deal with possible accreditation of ongoing professional learning activities. The responses indicate clearly that teachers value various forms of recognition. Not all teachers wish action research to be accredited. Many feel that the value of action research is intrinsic and do not wish any College involvement. Others would like to see their work formally recognized in tangible ways. They are aware of the related questions. Who does the judging? What action research methodologies would be accepted? Would there be consistency across the province and how might that interfere with local initiatives?

Informal Recognition

At one end of the response continuum, we hear the views of teachers who chose not to apply for accreditation and prefer intrinsic recognition. Many teachers in this category valued an audience, a sense of recognition by their peers. Examples included publishing in a board newsletter, presenting to staff or joining an electronic action research data base. Many teachers believe that the validation of action research should not have external criteria, *"The people who validate should leave the criteria out of it - there is a built in validation process."* Several teachers stated emphatically that establishing set criteria would change the very nature of action research and the reasons for involvement. *"It would change who is doing it!"* They prefer equating recognition with time. They would feel valued if time could be created for action research during the school day, if recognition could be embedded in daily practice. Recognition and tangible support from administration and release time to attend and present at a conference was considered a professional acknowledgement.

Other educators value their sense of self direction while creating their own criteria or standards. *"We strongly believe that standards of practice must be developed by the profession not imposed on it."* Another option offered was to move the emphasis from *"outcome accountability to a focus on the process."* This direction would allow for emergent designs and risk taking. According to these researchers, there are many ways to be recognized, ways that should reflect the specific school

context. As one teacher stated, *"The payoff is what is meaningful to you."* One team of researchers summed up this particular stance. *"Why does professional learning even need to be counted?"*

Delong and Whitehead(1999) caution that the standards of practice used by action research are not the traditional kind of external criteria we are so familiar with in education." (p3.) They explain that the standards of practice are living values whose meanings are not communicated in generalizable linguistic lists. Meaning would rather be communicated through the descriptions and explanations which teachers create for their own professional learning. One way that we see this being accomplished is through the sharing of research processes and results.

Most participants agreed that sharing the results of action research is a necessary step in the recognition process whether that sharing occurred in a small staff presentation or at an international conference. *"Sharing should happen on a stage that is comfortable for the individual."* Publishing, presenting and peer and parent recognition all rated highly as alternative ways that participation in action research could be valued by the educational community. Sharing is not always easy, but as one experienced researcher explained, "Sure its difficult for people to do but it has to become an accepted practice." Another respondent spoke enthusiastically about out of school opportunities. *"We are hungry for ideas ! Going to a conference is a real boost!"* Lori valued the opportunity to present, meet and learn from other teacher researchers at the recent International Conference on Teacher Research (Bishops University, 1999). She wrote to Fran after the event. *"I now have a better understanding of how diverse expectations and conditions for professional growth really are."*

Partnerships between teachers and out of classroom resource personnel such as university faculty, school board staff or as in our case, College staff, are valued for the mutual benefits to both participants. Comments from teachers in our study echo the reflections of Hamilton and Zaretsky (1999), a research coordinator and secondary teacher, who write about their research relationship. *"We are continually defining and redefining our respective roles and helping others define and redefine theirs"*(p14). They speak highly of the rewards of challenge and stimulation when they deal collaboratively with an issue in a proactive way, getting it done!

How do these comments from other educators resonate with Lori's experience?

> *When your work is valued you are inspired to continue – as it is with children. One very practical way my work was valued was its recognition towards completing my Primary Specialist Certification. The other more intangible ways of recognition through sharing were perhaps even more significant.*
> *We had the opportunity to share with other teacher researchers across Ontario: teleconferencing, conferences, a county wide discussion group, meeting and listening to visiting International academics, Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff. We contributed to the research activities for the College. We gave workshops and made presentations to the Board of Education. Our writing was published in two issues of Act, Reflect, Revise and in a resource package called Action Research. I presented at the International Conference on Teacher Research with Fran in April 1999.*
>
> *We remain to this day astonished that anyone would be interested in our musings and personal discoveries, trials and small successes. This interest certainly gave us courage to continue. For us the rewards for our participation in action research were seen in the changed attitudes and happy faces of our children. We carry with us what we learned – This teacher generated knowledge is now a part of our practice and has become a part of the practice of all of our colleagues in the primary division.*

Establishing Criteria: A Thorny Issue

Formal accreditation is positioned at the opposite end of the response continuum. Most educators agreed that if accreditation is to occur then some kind of "standards" for action research would be necessary. Establishing these criteria however is perceived as a thorny issue. We learned that many teachers expect the College to set the standards for action research and have the documentation handled by individual boards. *"The specific accrediting group sets the guidelines."* Another group of researchers suggested establishing evaluation panels to facilitate a two tier system of recognition. If the action researcher wished to have their work formally recognized, an advisory panel would determine whether the research process lead to practical classroom application. Within this two tier system, teachers who do not wish to submit their

work for accreditation need not do so. Examples of questions to be asked by such a panel were offered.

Does the research impact on student learning?
Is the research adaptable (generalizable) to other teachers?
Did it spark dialogue with other professionals?
Are the results publishable, coherent and organized?
Is the research an exploration of new concepts, ideas and practices?

Our research indicated that there was support for teachers developing their own criteria for assessing their projects. Delong and Wideman, (1998) suggest that a flexible list such as the following might guide individual teachers in the development of professional standards in action research.

Teachers will be able to:

- assess the effectiveness of their own practices in promoting student learning
- identify questions about their practice to guide inquiry into improving their own teaching, learning assessment and/or evaluation
- select, adapt, and develop strategies to improve practice (p.107)

Going on to include ethical considerations, data gathering strategies, recording and sharing results, Delong and Wideman provide a useful framework for teachers to assume responsibility and accountability within their practice through action research. We agree that such a list offers possibilities for professional growth or professional growth with formal credit. The decision should be up to the individual as they design their route through the professional learning framework selecting from a range of learning priorities and choices.

A number of teachers were interested in how action research could be integrated into the credit structure without changing its emergent design. Intrigued by the challenge of shifting the paradigm of traditional delivery methods, they brought forward many new possibilities. Some participants felt strongly that action research should form the basis for all Additional Qualifications courses. One group suggested that if the teacher/researcher wished to complete

an Additional Qualification credit, a knowledgeable supervisor could be named to facilitate and monitor the project within the school context. *"Why does an AQ have to be a formal course?"* Another creative alternative was the notion of an Additional Qualification course designed by a school team or staff to specifically meet the needs of the local context. The combination of Additional Qualifications courses and professional portfolios was positioned as a strategy for accountability in professional learning. A team of pre-service professors suggested that the teacher candidate's experience with action research count towards prerequisite requirements for master level programs, highlighting the importance of recognition by an outside agency. Even in this brief overview it is clear that teachers are eager to create new ways of obtaining credit for their professional learning.

Questions to Consider

Cole, (1997) argues that reflective practice has garnered little institutional support as an accepted form of professional learning. Trying to give that support, the college is faced with the dilemma of encouraging professional learning based on reflective practice while struggling with the issues of institutional recognition. We want to assure that institutional support through the learning framework and *The Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession* is meaningful and based on our teacher generated data. Cole suggests that the lack of support may come from the difficulty institutions face in controlling reflective practice as a form of professional learning. The same dilemma arises when we begin to think about accrediting action research, which would, some fear, involve quantifying and controlling practice. This need not be so. We need to be exploring ways to accommodate the guidelines that would accompany an accreditation process and the accounts of practice that describe action research. *The Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession* may prove to be the link. All new accredited programs in future will be based on the standards. Because a strong connection between action research and the standards has already been established through our inquiries and the research of others, we can explore creative ways to meet the requirements of formal recognition without changing the emergent, generative nature of action research.

Currently, as an institution we are also facing political pressure to incorporate mandatory professional learning within the professional learning framework. This direction would seem to create a dilemma for ongoing learning in practice, which by its very nature eludes compulsory structures. The next year will continue to provoke challenges and exciting opportunities for Lori and I and our colleagues in professional learning to address these issues. In our committee discussions we will continue to present data from practitioners and current literature while asking the question, How can the notion of action research be incorporated into the way we describe what it means to be a member of the teaching profession?

As Lori and I work collaboratively with our committees and input from the field to design the provincial professional learning framework we will seek answers to these dilemmas and consider the implications for action research and teacher researchers. In the conference session the participants will be invited to consider the possibilities for the recognition and acknowledgment of action research from their various perspectives. If action research is a powerful process for reflection and learning that honours teachers professionalism, how do we encourage its growth as a professional learning strategy? How should it be defined? What criteria should be used for its recognition and who should set the criteria? In addressing these issues we hope to listen and learn from others while providing an enriching forum for teacher researchers to share their knowledge and experience in professional learning.

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